ASIFA EAST • The International Animated Film Society

aNYmator

January 2003

Asifa-East January Event:

A screening of The Best Of The **2003 Ottawa International Student Animation Festival**!

7 PM. Thursday, January 22. SVA. 209 East 23rd St. (btwn 2nd & 3rd Ave) 3rd Floor Amphitheater.

Also Inside
- Michael Sporn is "Always a Bridesmaid"
- Frank and Ollie
- ASIFA East Remembers Wah Ming Chang

ASIFA East

The International Animated Film Society Northeast /New York Chapter

A Program of the New York Foundation For The Arts

President:
David B. Levy
c/o Blue's Clues
1633 Broadway 4th fl
New York, NY 10019

e-mail: David.Levy@nick.com
Call: (212) 654-6859
Fax: (212) 654-4720

Vice President/Programming:
Barbara Kearney

Membership Secretary:
Ila Abramson

International Executive Board:
Antran Manoogian
Antran.Manoogian@disney.com

Treasurer:
Toni Ty$en
(212) 586-8662

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Acting Newsletter Editor:
Mark Bailey
631.563.8223
beowulf1969@yahoo.com

Contributing Staff:
Michael Sporn, Richard Gorey, Jr., Brian Mitchell, Steven B. Orkin

DID YOU KNOW?

Jacob Burns Film Center presents:
John Canemaker: Marching To A Different Toon
Wed. Feb. 11 at 7:15

"No subject matter is off-limits or deemed too 'difficult' for the animation imagination of John Canemaker."-Jytte Jensen, Associate Curator, Department of Film and Video, The Museum of Modern Art

For more than two decades, John Canemaker has created animated films that charm, amuse, enlighten, and touch audiences. His "toons" have been featured in everything from The World According to Garp to "Pee-Wee's Playhouse," and his personal animated short films are in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. He has designed and directed animation for HBO, CBS, Warner Bros., and PBS projects that have won an Academy Award (You Don't Have to Die), Emmy Awards, and a Peabody Award (Break the Silence: Kids Against Child Abuse). Mr. Canemaker directs the animation program at New York University Tisch School of the Arts, and he is the author of 9 acclaimed books on animation history.

Please join John Canemaker for a 90-minute program in which he will show

and discuss a wide variety of his films, including: Confessions of a Stardreamer, Bridgehampton, The Wizard's Son, The World According to Garp (excerpts), Circus for Life, John Lennon Sketchbook, The Creative Spirit, What Do Children Think of When They Think of the Bomb?, and Break the Silence: Kids Against Child Abuse.

For more information and directions visit www.burnsfilmcenter.org

My Favorite Class
The Next Generation

I had a favorite class at SVA. It was a "How to get a job in Animation" class taught by Linda Simensky. Linda was at the tail end of her Nickelodeon period at the time. She conducted the class from a funky conference room at the Nickelodeon offices at 1515 Broadway. The room is called Town Hall and it's entrance is a genuine electric garage door! Each week Linda brought in a working NY Animation professional. We learned that "working" in a NY Animation sense meant layoffs and periods of short term work. Animators like Steve Dovas and Mo Willems gave us the warts and all tales of their journey since leaving school. I was left with a huge regard for anyone who stuck with this occupation or craft and succeeded in doing it in the city of their choosing.

As of January 2004, I find myself in the unexpected position of taking over Linda's old SVA class. Linda recently joked to me that I am living her life when she was in her late 20s: NY, Asifa-East, Nickelodeon, teaching at SVA, and a continuing obsession with the Beatles! Could long curly black hair be in my future?

At some point soon, I'll be looking for work while teaching a class called "How to get a job in Animation." I'll be my own guinea pig. Whatever comes my way, it should make for some interesting classes ahead.

I've heard it said that whatever the industry throws at you, the ball remains in your court. We can control whether or not we draw, paint, sculpt, illustrate, make animated films, read, see inspiring films, join societies like Asifa-East, pitch ideas, network with others and so on. The industry is going to go up and down and there's a good chance that it will impact you sooner or later. It seems like the very nature of our industry in NY ensures that only those who are the most sincere will stick it out for the long haul. I'm forever grateful to Asifa-East for bringing us together each month to help each other soldier on.

Best wishes for a successful and peaceful New Year!

VIEW POINT AIEM

Always A Bridesmaid

by Michael Sporn

Most of my articles for this paper have supported Independently produced animation.

I questioned whether I did that because I was an Independent animation film maker, or because I actually enjoyed that type of film more. As an intelligent being, I prefer films that speak to me. As a political animal, I also prefer films with a statement. This fact hit me with a large thud back in 1963 when I first saw the work of John and Faith Hubley. Their MOONBIRD, their OF STARS AND MEN, THE HOLE, WINDY DAY and THE HAT. These all came flooding in on me at once – it seems the moment I entered college.

Since that time I can count on my fingers the number of films I think are the very best animation has had to offer. As a matter of fact, more than one hand of fingers were films done between 1963 and 1976. There have been very few films since then that have grabbed me emotionally. In the past ten years there have been few – very few films that have excited me to the point where I wanted to rush back and animate.

All of them have been Independently produced.

Some individual was responsible for them.

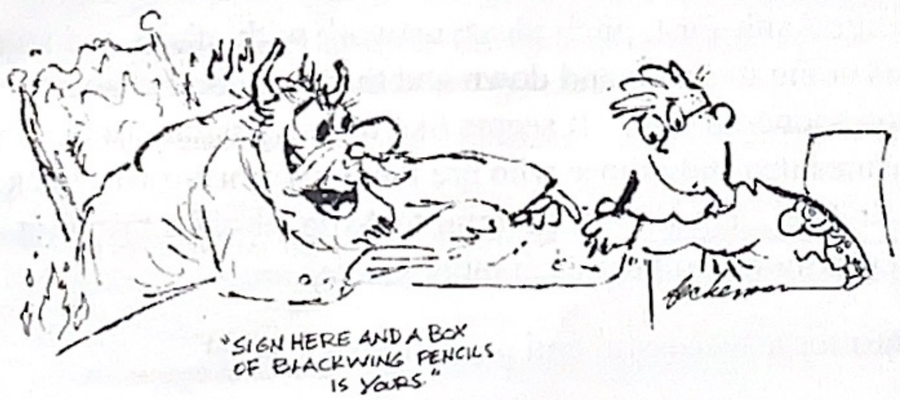
I thought of this after viewing Paul and Sandra Fierlinger's excellent film, "A Room Nearby," at last month's ASIFA meeting. Paul has been making animated films longer than I have. He has synthesized his work into a comfortable and individual style, that is remarkably unique. His work has turned less commercial and more organic; the stories have come rushing out of his studio in long form, original statements. They are remarkable, entertaining and wholly engaging.

He and Sandra should only be congratulated for their achievement.

Of course, this hasn't been the case. In all my conversations with him over many years, he has articulated a complaint I have aired many times. There's such a lack of appreciation for intelligent, adult, ANIMATED films - particularly within the animation community. Unless your film has zip moves or bathroom jokes or distortion beyond belief, your films will not be loved. Unless your films are on ones and are Tex Avery clones, you can forget about getting into animation festivals. No one's interested.

When I made CHAMPAGNE back in 1997, I realized that animation festivals weren't going to support my film. I made a conscious decision not to enter the film into the Oscars as an animated film. I sent it in as a documentary short. It got itself to the short list of films nominated and was invited back for an Academy recognition of the Best Documentary program the next year. As expected, animation festivals did reject it. Annecy, Zagreb, Ottawa – not even in the Panorama showcases.

I started entering the film in documentary festivals and found acceptance and appreciation. Film makers would write me from far off places to express their appreciation. The documentary people seemed mature and adult, ready to accept something different. It didn't matter that the film moved on two's or three's; it was what the film was saying and how it did that counted.



Finding Disney

by Brian Mitchell

I have been a Disney fan for all my life. I always liked the movies, Theme Parks and those old television shows. The Disney Productions made such an impression on me that eventually I wanted to work in the entertainment business. Not only did Walt Disney believe in good stories told well, but he focused on doing things to the best of his ability and expected the same of his staff.

The crown jewel of Disney was always the Feature Animation division as it was the feeding ground for most of the Disney Company. Merchandising, Theme Parks, Television, Home Video and even Broadway gets it's inspiration from Feature Animation. Disney Veteran Animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston once mused that "It's the tail that wags the dog."

Every now and then I'm asked, "What makes Disney so special?" Often I'm stumped because its not a simple answer, because a few words don't seem to nail it. The words Magic, Quality and Solid Storytelling seem to sell it short. Certainly creating strong believable personalities is certainly a big part of the mix. And how do you create Magic or Quality anyway?

Many years ago, a talented animator in New York explained to me that Disney animated films are each like a colorful Christmas present. Each film is a special gift that comes maybe once a year in theaters. When these films are made correctly, you leave the theater feeling very good about the experience. A good Disney film takes you somewhere, introduces you to fun characters and engages you in good story and music. When done right, a Disney animated film creates a strong emotional experience that can stick with people for a long time. Every time you see another Disney show, movie or live attraction that exhibits those same qualities, the emotional bonds are further strengthened.

It's the collective of everything Disney that made the Brand so strong and emotional to so many. From a friendly and helpful employee at The Disney Store, to a glistening performance of The Main Street Electrical Parade at Disneyland, or the emotions surging through ones' body at the climax of Cinderella, it's the sum of all those parts that makes Disney special. It's that very emotional connection that makes people spend freely on merchandise, movies and vacations. Unfortunately, when experiences are memorable for all the wrong reasons, like viewing a mediocre animated direct to video sequel or experiencing an improperly maintained attraction at a Disney theme park, it can have a devastating effect on that 'overall emotional effect.' It's sad that Disney, the company, doesn't understand that. By closing their cartoon feature animation division in Burbank and Florida, the Disney Company has shown that it has no clear understanding of what makes the company tick. By producing low budget animated direct to video sequels or 'cheapquels' (as they have now been called), it is further degrading the Disney name by milking every last cent. Reducing operating costs at the Theme Parks have resulted in making the Disney experience less special and more mundane. It seems that as Disney gets further away from its' roots, the more problems it seems to have. Unwilling to acknowledge these problems, the Disney Executive Board seems content to continue down an ever darkening roadway.

A few weeks ago, Roy Edward Disney, the only family member who is still active with the company, resigned his position on the board in order to save it. The last time Roy resigned, he managed to turn the company around and get it back on track.

A website has been started at www.savedisney.com and he's encouraging people to voice their displeasure with the current management at Disney. Many people in the animation and film industries have voiced strong support. If you feel the same way, please visit Roys' site and make your voice heard. He may be Disneys' last chance to turn itself around. Let's hope that this 'very real' Disney story has an equally happy ending.

Brian Mitchell is an Emmy Award Winning animation artist who has worked on numerous animated television shows and movies and is currently producing a cartooning instructional series. He can be reached via e-mail at mitchellprods@aol.com.

Frank and Ollie

By Richard Gorey

Many of our readers may have already seen the documentary film "Frank and Ollie" (produced in '93 and '94, and released in '95) theatrically. It's an affectionate portrait of two of Disney's fabled "Nine Old Men": Frank Thomas and his lifelong friend and collaborator, Ollie Johnston. The film was produced by Frank's son, Theodore, and Kuniko Okubo. Ted Thomas and Kuniko are also known for their work with National Geographic, and for a series of documentary films with subjects ranging from the Grizzly bears of North America to the Astronauts of the space program.

It's unlikely the pair's "Frank and Ollie" is well known outside the animation industry, and that's something of a shame. The new edition of the film on DVD offers the complete original work, plus several scenes which were cut from the theatrical release, along with a wealth of new clips, storyboards, sketches, and rough pencil tests. The extended release format, with its separate menus, is well suited to such a program. The original film's easygoing, unhurried style may not have supported a two-hour plus running time, and the added information can be accessed in bits and pieces, almost like browsing through a reference book on the subject.

Ted Thomas's intimate and engaging tribute to his father's work reveals the sometimes complex, often frustrating, but undoubtedly rewarding career of master animator Frank Thomas, and how that career complimented-- and was inspired by-- the relationship Frank shared with his co-worker Ollie Johnston. Together, these two animators were responsible for some of the most deeply resonant cartoon characters to appear in the Disney features. Thumper and Bambi, Pluto, Pinocchio, the Three Good Fairies from "Sleeping Beauty"-- all of these were the creations of two lifelong friends and collaborators who were somehow able to maintain their sanity, individuality, and integrity in a business that can- even in the best of times- be grueling and debilitating.

I had a chance to speak to Ted Thomas about the film, his father, and the reasons he created this informative work.

"I wanted to make a film, not only about the process of animation," Ted says, "but about the unusual and lasting friendship that in some way contributed to this specific art form- this thing that in some ways has been taken for granted. It didn't just happen, it developed, in a very specific set of circumstances, over time."

Thomas' film is the record of a friendship, and the development of that "process" that has become known as animation. It's also a tip of the hat to the accomplishments of Ted's father, whose dedication to this evolving craft helped define the parameters and the expectations of the medium.

"It was a challenge," Ted says, "to make a film about an very complex and very visual process, but to feature as my subjects two men that are no longer working in the field. The challenge was to make that process- and their passion- clear, but without showing them actually ANIMATING."

It's an interesting dilemma. How DO you convey the complexities of personality animation without showing the work during its actual creation? Ted's solution, which to my mind was very clever and effective, was to explore the experience of personality animation by showing the interactions and "performances" between his two subjects, who have become so close over the decades that they are often able to finish each other's sentences. We may not get to see Thomas and Johnston DRAW during the film, but in a sense, they're still "drawing" on their experiences and their emotions when they come together to reminisce, discuss philosophy, or to pantomime the dramas they once enacted with their pencils. We watch these two elderly gentlemen as the disappear into the subjective realities of very correct British schoolgirls, talking doorknobs, grandfatherly cats, secret agent mice, and the minds of some of the most compelling villains the art of animation has produced.

"Don't tell me, show me," goes the old saying. Thomas and Johnston are living cartoon characters; they have, over the years, become an extension of their best work. It's one of the film's meaningful messages about creativity. It isn't enough to know how to draw. To skillfully communicate to an audience, a real animator must understand and- to some extent- become his or her character. From this perspective, the film becomes a demonstration not of the MECHANICS of animation, but of that intangible thought process that results in a finished scene.

Through their characters, Thomas and Johnston were actors in a true sense of the word; their interplay as they reinterpret their cartoon alter-egos is startling for its accuracy and fidelity to the source material-- even after the passage of many years. They know their characters extremely well, though they haven't touched them physically since the days the films were drawn. They speak of their work and their creations with unguarded affection, as if they're speaking of friends they still value. One senses the emotional connection Johnston and Thomas had to the films they were a part of. "Frank and Ollie" is ostensibly a film about the movies, but it is more about the internal alchemy that RESULTS in movies.

Those looking for conflict, gossip, and horror stories about the "good-old-days" might come away disappointed. Even other written and filmed accounts of their histories support Ted's view that his subjects are two very nice guys who floated above the conflict and strife that often surrounded them while in the industry. Though working on the Disney features for forty years must often have been a challenging, exhausting undertaking, the memories and observations of Johnston and Thomas always steer towards the delights inherent in their craft, instead of the heartaches. How did they sustain their enthusiasm in the face of some of their disappointments?

At one point during the documentary Frank Thomas relates a sentiment with which many animators will identify;

"Once you've seen that little thing you've drawn move on its own…once you've seen that drawing take off and move and act and come to life-- nothing else will ever do. Nothing else will ever top that for you."

That thrill evidently kept these artists at their desks during what must have been trying times: when hundreds of feet of footage was cut from Bambi, when the schedule for Sleeping Beauty dragged on for six grueling years, when the critics savaged Alice in Wonderland-- and in the seventies, when relations between the other animators and the cantankerous Milt Kahl descended into anarchy and chaos.

But, thirty some-odd years after retirement, those things are water under the bridge. What survives are the moments people have taken to their hearts; the film seems more attached to unearthing the circumstances behind these moments than to rehash events already covered quite elegantly in John Canemaker's superlative Nine Old Men (and other animation histories). Hearing Thomas and Johnston talking about the delight they felt when discovering the perfect voice for Thumper, and listening to them discuss their solutions while hammering out the friendship between Mowgli and Baloo in "Jungle Book", one is conscious of the real magic behind these enduring film classics. Often, what affects the audience is more than polished technique, or skilled draftsmanship. What haunts the public's consciousness is the impact of moments like the death of Bambi's mother, Baloo's reluctant "betrayal" of young Mowgli, and the terrible (and emotionally terrifying) destruction of Cinderella's dress by her hateful stepsisters.

I asked Ted Thomas- considering his father's easygoing disposition and fears of the unpredictable nature of the world around him- if such scenes of loss, unkindness, and rage were difficult to inhabit.

"That's an interesting question," he answered. "I think Frank knew, instinctively, the villains were always more interesting than the heroes. They have to be more complex, because they struggle with different demons than the more stoic heroes do. I've known many actors and artists who were unable to be creative unless there was some form of conflict present—whether with someone else, or within themselves. Some people need that conflict to operate against, to stir their process."

It's possible creating and bringing life to these troubled, violently unhappy characters served as an emotional release for the more amiable and subdued Frank and Ollie- but that might be too facile a theory. It's been said that more people HATED the stepmother from Cinderella than any other Disney villain, ever-- and Thomas' Queen of Hearts from Alice is a staggering (and very funny) caricature of what we now call "a control freak". How Thomas was able to create these indelible moments of anger and chaos- yet remain the friendly, thoughtful, soul behind the films is a pleasant contradiction.

This quality of unassuming candor comes across beautifully in the film. Perhaps it is the movie's most appealing trait. Truly TALENTED people can actually be really NICE people, too. It's a revelation in these woeful days of reality TV- where the worst kind of behavior is tolerated- even championed, if it will draw attention and ratings.

Ted Thomas' film, like its subjects, moves deliberately and with a gentle pace. In this respect it's much like the process of animation itself. Don't expect breakneck MTV cutting here, or any intense confrontations between interview subjects. This documentary about the deliberate, time-consuming process of animation has a complimentary rhythm, as befits its thoughtful, sedate subjects. According to Ted Thomas, most of his father's "conflicts" and "struggles" were INTERNAL, as opposed to external.

"He had some recurring nightmares. Vivid dreams, about impossible situations: losing your luggage, for instance, or not being in the right place at the right time," Ted says.

In Canemaker's book, Nine Old Men, Ted discusses Frank's uncertainty, his feeling that the world was a scary place. In this way, Frank Thomas' work reminds me of the contradiction of Alfred Hitchcock's films. Hitchcock, it has often been said, had a morbid fear of authority and of the police. He was a borderline agoraphobic, some who knew him observed. Yet this unassuming, easily-frightened English gentleman created films filled with terror and violence, where he placed people much like himself into the most disagreeable peril. Frank Thomas, likewise, often created situations and characters that have traumatized both children and adults-- yet, for all the fear, anger, and angst in his best work, his personal life is characterized by its gentility, tranquility, and his sixty-year friendship with a soul of the same affable disposition.

"A gentleman doesn't have to be disagreeable to disagree", Ted Thomas recalls his father saying. "It's always important- in any conflict- to hear what the other person is really saying, not just how they say it."

This philosophy seems to have crept into Thomas' interactions at the studio-- and into his animation, which was often seen on the screen accompanying the work of his friend Johnston. Their best scenes are evidence of an exhaustive thought process and an instinctive understanding of the collaborative nature of filmmaking. The evil stepmother, for instance, is only truly effective when played against the innocence of her victims, and the innocuous comedy of the friendly animals around her.

Watching Thomas and Johnston play off of each other in the documentary gives a good indication of how their animation played in harmony with itself and the other elements, both technical and emotional, that surrounded it. It isn't just that their characters MOVE well, it's that they perform and react in emotionally believable ways. There's that cliché that animation is "acting with a pencil". Well, it's true, in the hands of such sensitive professionals. Good personality animation is still the best "special effect" of all. Thomas and Johnston's careers have enabled them to play roles they might never have managed to attempt, in live action. Literally, there are no limits (beyond one's imagination) to what may be accomplished in such films. At Disney's, this artistic freedom was complimented with large budgets- and technical resources to which many other animators may not have had access. It seems in retrospect the best possible environment for talents like Frank and Ollie's to have matured.

Still, despite such enviable working conditions, Frank sometimes felt he was "in the wrong profession", his son recalls, "when there was trouble at the studio, for instance, or some of the politics got in the way." But he always came back to his senses, telling those who heard him doubt his choices, "Remind me how much fun this can be when it works. I'd never leave, because I wouldn't want to miss out on this."

Though their focus was necessarily on the job at hand, Frank and Ollie did, on several occasions, take the time to appreciate the work of others OUTSIDE the Disney studios.

Ted Thomas recalls his father was quite impressed with the newness of the UPA films, when they arrived on the scene. "The style and the cleanliness of it, that was exciting to Frank, and Ollie," Ted says. More recently, the work being done at Pixar has made an impression on Johnston and Thomas, as has Warner's recent feature, "The Iron Giant".

Thomas and Johnston, perhaps not surprisingly, feel animation has not begun to reach its potential. Glen Keane talks about animating a scene from "The Rescuers", of the little girl Penny, while a novice under Ollie Johnston in the late seventies. He had struggled with it, and had overworked it, and when Johnston came in and gently corrected it, Keane was crestfallen. "Don't worry," Johnston said. "You'll do better. You'll do better than we ever did, before you're through."

It's a wonderful story, not seen in the theatrical version of the film. Its inclusion on the extended DVD is one of the reasons this edition is worth picking up. Also quite remarkable is a story reel from "The Rescuers", of the scene in the cave, where the mice Bernard and Bianca assist the trapped Penny in escaping the rising tide. There's something so compelling and thrilling about watching the original pencil animation: maybe it's the fact that it represents the work of the artist in its purest, simplest form. I loved this newly-inserted sequence, and for comparison there's the storyboard and inspirational sketches for the scene as well. On another menu, there are Technicolor clips from the first work Johnston and Thomas created at the Disney studio, scenes from Brave Little Tailor and The Flying Mouse.

In the main feature, one sees the developing art form of cartoon drawing, from films like "Snow White" to "Pinocchio", to "Alice", to "Sword in the Stone" (not one of my favorites, but useful as a counterpoint to the rounded, lush look of the earlier features). It's interesting to see the animation, and the performances, become more and more efficient and polished, as the handsome nature of the backgrounds themselves fade more and more into something pedestrian and flat by the seventies. It's almost as if, subconsciously, those at the studio had realized what the value and appeal was within the works, and decided to showcase these assets over the surface gloss many had come to expect. This trend reversed itself after "The Black Cauldron", when the familiar "house style" that had been in vogue for thirty years became something more diverse and elegant. Today, the handsome backings and deep settings are back, and are much welcome.

Ted related that Frank and Ollie sometimes (in a genial and playful way) envy the animators currently working in the business. I found this odd, and asked why. Ted Thomas feels it has something to do with the arduous learning curve that was established in the thirties and the forties. "They had to learn all about these principles, like squash and stretch, by doing it, and sometimes getting it wrong."

"You were always thinking in terms of how you were going to draw the scene, and how you were going to solve the problem," Frank Thomas said. "These days, an animator starting out has all these existing films to fall back on. It's like a training ground for those coming in, and it creates a more rounded base to develop from".

It's an interesting way to look at the history of the business, and yet I wonder how those working today might feel about the opportunities they may feel are lacking. We all know the industry is struggling, and the kind of in-house training Disney was once famous for seems a thing of the past.

Though Ted Thomas has enormous respect for the traditional process and business of animation, he feels, "The next innovation in animation will be managerial, not technical. The right combination of a visionary producer and a good story, combined with the best use of technology and talent."

It's the same kind of "coming together" that's celebrated in "Frank and Ollie", when you think about it. Watching the film, one gets the impression that the elements were in place to allow greatness: an emerging art form defining state-of-the-art, the serendipitous meeting of two like-minded talents, and the opportunity to rise to the top of this groundbreaking profession to create scenes that (while technically elaborate) also possessed remarkable emotional power.

"We were on a television show, and we were supposed to make a big entrance through these sliding doors, and they had this big stagehand there, to open the doors for us," Frank Thomas recalls, "and someone said, you know, 'break a leg' or something, and this big guy glares at us and says, 'So YOU'RE the guys who killed Bambi's mother!'" Johnston finishes the story: "And we just shrank away, you know…" Then they both go into a pantomime of slinking away that is worthy of any character they ever animated. Living cartoons—and it's delightful.

"We're very excited to have "Frank and Ollie" out in a new format," Ted Thomas says. "The experience of the film as I imagined it is now complete. It's a picture about what it means to create. I hope it serves as an inspiration for a new generation of artists."

"Frank and Ollie" was created as a gift to Ted Thomas' father, but in the end, it's also a great gift to the millions who have enjoyed Thomas' and Johnston's work-- and to the hundreds- maybe thousands- out there who aspire to someday create such work themselves.

Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston

ASIFA East Remembers Wah Ming Chang

by Steven B. Orkin

By all accounts, Wah Ming Chang was a quiet, unassuming man, but he nevertheless got around, working with such notables as Willis O'Brien, Ray Harryhausen, Jim Danforth and George Pal.

Chang died December 22nd in Carmel, CA at the age of 86. His decades-long career included several notable credits, including a Special Effects Oscar for his work on George Pal's "Time Machine." He also contributed work to Pal's Puppet Tunes as a stop-motion animator on "The Three Bears," among other projects.

Wah Ming Chang created posable models for animators working on Bambi

Working briefly with Disney's model and special effects department, he made significant contributions to three 1940's Disney classics. He constructed posable models for "Bambi," created sculptures for "Pinocchio," and contributed special effects work on "Fantasia." He left Disney after being stricken with Polio, and carried around a get-well note from Walt Disney while recovering.

Some of his best known later work includes creating monsters, space ships and gadgets for the original "Star Trek" and "Outer Limits" television series. He also created models and hand-puppets for "Land of the Lost," and sculpted a series of heads for the first Pillsbury Doughboy. For film, he contributed masks to "Planet of the Apes," designed costumes for "The King & I," and Liz Taylor's headdress in "Cleopatra."

His retired years were largely devoted to bronze sculpture, much of which reflects his concern with wildlife and endangered species.

He is survived by his half-sister and several nieces and nephews.

Steven B. Orkin is a freelance writer based on Long Island. In addition to an as yet unpublished fantasy trilogy, among other projects, he was a winner in Stephen King's On Writing Contest. He can be reached at Starren@optonline.net.

ASIFA EAST
c/o Michael Sporn Animation, Inc.
35 Bedford Street
NYC, NY 10014

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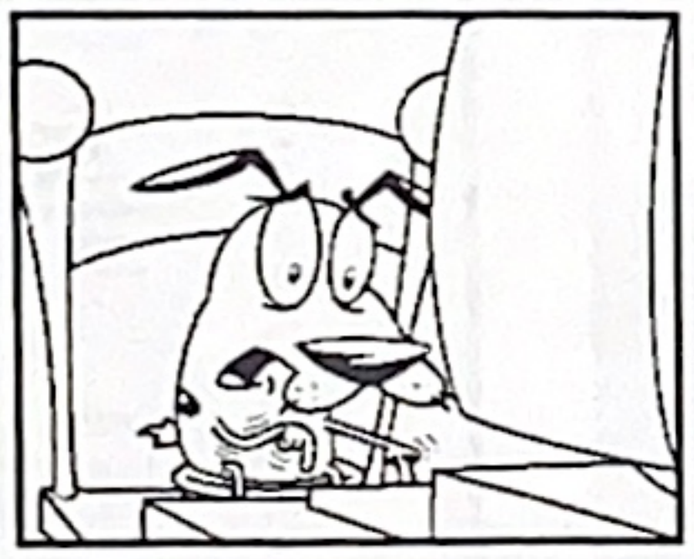

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